

## **Coping with the Barbarian Syndrome: The Challenges of Researching Civilian-Military Interaction “from Below” in the Eastern DR Congo**

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### **Introduction: the African armed actor as epitome of the present-day barbarian**

The gun does not only make armed actors armed: it defines them, bestows an identity upon them and situates them in a narrative. In relation to war zones, the causal emplotment of this narrative usually centers around killing, rape and other atrocities, with the armed actor inevitably figuring not only as perpetrator, but also as the locus of evil (Mamdani 2007). This reflects the strong focus on human suffering, immediate causes, and readily identifiable good and bad guys that characterizes mainstream knowledge production on war zones (Seaton 2005). Thus, the victimizer/victim dichotomy is made to seamlessly fit the military/civilian divide.

Whereas grappling with this dichotomous portrayal of armed vs. non-armed actors presents a difficulty to any researcher studying civilian-military interaction in a war zone, it becomes even more of a challenge where narratives of violent conflict are strongly imbued with tropes of barbarism. This generally occurs when the theater is located in “the Global South”, the discursive (re)production of which strongly draws upon imaginaries of primitivism and uncivilization (Escobar 1994). In contrast to violence in “the West”, which tends to be more readily identified as “political”, violence in the “underdeveloped” world is often depicted as caused by “ancient tribal hatreds”, “breakdowns of civilization”, or “the warrior ethos of primitive peoples” (Richards 1996; Allen & Seaton 1999). Arguably, the (seeming)

depoliticization, delegitimization and criminalization of violent conflict in the post-Cold War and post-9/11 eras have only reinforced this tendency, causing armed actors globally to be primarily labelled as “terrorists” or “criminals”, if not already framed as “barbarians” (Bhatia 2005; Duffield 2007).

One factor nourishing these processes is the strong resonance of the framings of violent conflict produced by the aid industry, in particular its humanitarian branch. This resonance is partly the product of its close, at times incestuous relationship with the increasingly commodified news media (Benthall 1997; Cottle and Nolan 2007). This media-aid complex is instrumental in the (re)production of the discourses that construct “the Global South” and that inform and legitimize aid, military and other interventions, ostensibly aimed at its “repair”. Whatever rhetorical cloak these discourses assume, whether they are packaged for instance as old or “new” humanitarianism, developmentalism, or Security Sector Reform, their basic structures are largely similar to those of the “development discourse” as analyzed by Arturo Escobar (1994). This discursive formation, which encompasses forms of knowledge, subjectivities, and modes of power projection, strongly draws upon racist and technocratic modes of thinking. Thus, it (re)produces regimes of representation that have homogenizing and objectifying effects and that transform “the underdeveloped” into non-subjects, stripped of (rational) agency.

The dominant narratives and representations of violence in “the Global South” form a toxic burden for any scholar conducting field research in one of its war zones. This burden becomes even heavier when it concerns research in a country that has since its genesis been the apex of Western imaginings of African barbarism and chaos, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). As stated by Kevin Dunn (2003:5), dominant understandings of events in the DRC continue to be rooted in “hundred-year-old racial stereotypes” that are part and parcel of colonially scripted images of African backwardness and primitivism. Not surprisingly, this

applies *a fortiori* to representations of violence and its wielders, whether state or non-state actors (Eriksson Baaz & Stern 2008). The recent rise in international attention on the so-called “Congo rape epidemic” appears to have only reinforced such framings, since it has triggered the proliferation of images of the Congolese (armed) male as a lust-driven and bestial Other (Autesserre 2012; Eriksson Baaz & Stern 2008; 2013).

It has been well established that these narratives and representations of violence have deeply political underpinnings and consequences (Dunn 2003; Demmers forthcoming; Duffield 2007). What has received less attention, by contrast, is how these discourses affect the (Western) ethnographer that is supposed to “build rapport” with both these “beasts” and those undeniably suffering at their hands. What specific methodological and personal difficulties does this discursive baggage create for the researcher? What impact does it have on his or her psyche and ways of conducting research? How does it shape the collection and interpretation of data, and what strategies does the researcher develop to cope with this “barbarian syndrome”? Another neglected aspect of the issue of the impact of dominant framings on research is the question of the effects of the new media revolution. The present-day researcher does no longer live in an age where the mentioned media-aid complex has a near-monopoly on the production and diffusion of representations of violent conflict: in the era of the new media and globalization, information is available through a variety of channels, and voices from “the Global South” are diffused via blogs, Twitter and Facebook. Yet it remains unclear how this impacts on the grids of intelligibility of the (Western) researcher: do the new media hamper or facilitate the arduous task of coping with the barbarian syndrome?

This chapter intends to address these questions, drawing on the experience of over thirteen months of ethnographic research on the everyday interaction between soldiers of the Congolese armed forces and civilians in the eastern DRC’s restless Kivu provinces. In the first part of the chapter, I discuss a number of basic features of the Congolese army and the

ways in which it has been portrayed, and then briefly outline the research project.

Subsequently, I attend to some of the main challenges encountered in the course of the field research: first, overcoming sensationalism and ethnographic seduction in relation to perpetrators, and second, dealing with the impact of dominant discourses, in particular those of human rights, on the gathering and interpretation of data. The next part discusses some of the strategies that I developed in my efforts to “tame the beast” of the barbarian syndrome, specifically the efforts to expand my interpretative horizons and reflect on power effects. This part also addresses the question how the new media impacted on these endeavours, and reflects on how these media might affect our capacity to listen to the Other more generally.

### **Conducting research in an unknown yet pre-defined space**

The Congolese armed forces (FARDC, *Forces armées de la République démocratique du Congo*) were created in 2003 out of a merger of the fighting forces of the belligerents of the Second Congo War (1998-2002). The merging process was plagued with difficulties, which was both a cause and a consequence of the ongoing violence in the eastern part of the country. Soon after its birth, it became clear that the FARDC strongly resembled previous incarnations of the Congolese armed forces in terms of its disorderliness, rapaciousness and predatory behavior vis-à-vis civilians. Furthermore, due to a variety of reasons, including its weak combat capacity and close ties to extra-military networks, the FARDC became a sustaining factor in the continuing violence in the east (Eriksson Baaz & Verweijen 2013).

Near-permanent military operations and the constant absorption of rebel fighters into the national army have caused military deployment to the Kivus to be massive. In 2010, the provinces counted (on paper) around 65.000 of the (again on paper) 150.000 troops of the

FARDC.<sup>1</sup> Due to a near total lack of military infrastructure, including barracks, the far-out majority of FARDC troops live in civilian homes or make-shift camps in or near urban quarters or villages. Consequently, interactions between soldiers and civilians are frequent. The military's heavy involvement in revenue-generation, including but not limited to extortion, further intensifies these contacts. Many soldiers and their families try to make ends meet through such activities as petty trade, market-gardening or charcoal and palm-oil production. This shared living and socio-economic space with civilians has made that in many zones, the FARDC is an integral part of social life. As a result, everyday interactions between civilians and the military surpass the familiar narratives of rape, extortion and torture. While abuses certainly occur at a large scale, civilians and the military also encounter each other in the capacity of buyers, sellers, creditors, debtors, patrons, clients, neighbors, tenants, lovers, and friends (Verweijen forthcoming).

Yet, little is known about these everyday interactions and practices. In light of the paucity of empirically grounded academic research on the armed forces in the DRC<sup>2</sup>, mainstream media and the aid industry have a virtual monopoly on the production and diffusion of knowledge and images on the FARDC. However, the knowledge they produce tends to focus singularly on its large-scale involvement in either specific human rights violations (related to bodily harm) (e.g. Human Rights Watch 2009) or the exploitation of what have been labelled “conflict minerals” (e.g. Global Witness 2009). These issues tend to be presented as compartmentalized domains, each with its own specific normative and solution-oriented narratives (Autesserre 2012). Consequently, this knowledge is of limited use for an empirical study of the entire spectrum of civilian-military interactions and interdependencies.

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<sup>1</sup> There is a notorious discrepancy between the amount of troops on the payroll and those on the ground. An identification exercise in 2011 reduced the amount of troops in the Kivus to around half the previously registered number. Data obtained through interviews with international military experts in Bukavu and Goma in November 2011 and February 2012.

<sup>2</sup> With the notable exception of the work of Maria Eriksson Baaz and Maria Stern, see e.g. Eriksson Baaz & Stern 2008, 2009, 2013.

Additionally, the productions of the media-aid complex are strongly grounded in representations of civilians as mere passive victims suffering at the hands of the military (Eriksson Baaz & Stern 2013). This is at odds with my theoretical approach, which takes civilians' agency as its point of departure. Furthermore, the omnipresent focus on immediate events and actors that is found in dominant narratives (Autesserre 2012) hampers an analysis of the influence of social structures. Yet, the study of structural features is a core component of my research, which draws on the theory of structuration (Giddens 1984). Unfortunately, I found that most of the knowledge made available through the social media suffered from the same limitations as the productions of the media-aid complex. There are no accounts authored by FARDC soldiers in the new media space, nor do there seem to be blogs presenting different narratives in relation to civilian-military interaction. Therefore, I started my research with little prior knowledge to build on.

As it promised to give an insight into both the micro-dynamics of civilian-military interaction and its macro dimensions, the main methodology chosen for my research was ethnography (cf. Burawoy 1998). Given that structural influences are not always revealed in agents' discourses (Giddens 1984), I decided to heavily rely on (participant) observation, complemented by semi-structured group and individual interviews. Eventually, I conducted over thirteen months of field research between 2010 and 2012, divided into three phases of around four months each. The field research focused on three units of analysis: first, a number of army units were closely followed in order to analyze the internal workings of the military; second, patterns of civilian-military were studied in a number of different locales with the aim of studying the impact of differences in social and conflict dynamics; and third, various categories of economic operators were contacted, like small-scale traders and fishermen, in order to analyze how they cope with, contest and instrumentalize military presence (for a

more detailed description see Verweijen forthcoming). In the following, I will further zoom in on the challenges encountered when implementing this research strategy.

### *From sensationalism to ethnographic seduction*

Popular portrayals of African warfare as driven by barbarism and savagery have a profound impact on the mind-set of the researcher, in particular when she “descends” for the first time into the “underbelly of civilization”. They produce, perhaps inevitably, a deep feeling of excitement, the thrill of (promises of) the spectacle of violence and a rewarding new status of someone who has accomplished the self-glorifying rite of passage of “having been there”.

Are Westerners not pre-programmed to experience their baptism of fire in the “land of black savages”, allowing them to act out their self-centered fantasies of adventure and heroism?

(McClintock 1995). Indeed, I could not escape sensations of thrill when talking for the first time to army officers known for having committed war crimes, when witnessing “live” road block extortion, or when travelling on a motorcycle on “red axes” with elevated ambush risk. However, thrill is a bad guide in science: it blinds rather than enlightens, it distracts rather than helps focus. And excitement leads us to fall too easily into the exoticism trap-seeing only what appears as the bizarre, the deviant, the weird: the witchcraft practicing ex-Mai Mai officer<sup>3</sup>, the rapist in uniform, the extortionist at the roadblock, the greedy general-turned-businessman, in brief, the Other. But how can we resist the temptation of excitement and imagined heroism if the notion of a “dangerous place” is the only mental template instantly available?

It was only through prolonged and repeated interaction with “the Other” that the grip of the instant excitement of “being there” started to loosen, opening up the prospects of stepping over the exoticism threshold. Yet, being confronted with the humanity that one finds at the

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<sup>3</sup> The name Mai Mai refers to locally rooted militias that employ discourses of communal self-defense. These groups engage in magical practices in order to obtain a sense of invincibility on the battlefield.

other side of that threshold can be perplexing, especially when it concerns perpetrators of horrible abuses. To discover that the butcher, the rapist, or the torturer can be highly friendly, eloquent, caring, gentle and intelligent individuals, that in fact perpetrators of horrendous abuses are “people like everybody else”, sent shockwaves through my system: with the solid grounds of certain moral truths slipping away under my feet, I entered a morass of convoluted feelings and thoughts, in the depths of which lurked the realization that the perpetrator is actually not so different from ourselves (cf. Dauphinée 2007).

While the exploding of the cast of the perpetrator was necessary to capture the moral fluidities and ambiguities that are a hallmark of war zones, it also opened up new dangers. Initially, it led me become entangled in a type of “de-demonization euphoria” that bubbled up, it seemed, as an antidote to the barbarian syndrome. The subsequent overwhelming and ungraspable consciousness of feeling a degree of sympathy for certain perpetrators, and the schizophrenia of having to reconcile this with an awareness of the acts they had committed, increased my susceptibility to “ethnographic seduction” (Robben 1995).

As described by Robben (1995: 83-84), ethnographic seduction is the process whereby an ethnographer is “led astray unawares” by interlocutors’ efforts to make her or him adopt their interpretations, implying a loss of reflective detachment to the advantage of an electric sense of contact. Techniques of seduction, commonly geared towards achieving complicity, include rationalization, the manipulation of affect, plays with veiling/unveiling, or appeals to expert knowledge. The full range of these techniques were applied by the FARDC officers that I had conversations with, a number of whom were suspected of involvement in atrocities. While few of my interlocutors acknowledged being responsible for abuses themselves, or if so, refused to go into detail, the majority admitted that “mistakes” had indeed occurred. Such acknowledgement was usually followed by explanations inscribed in narratives of rationalization and relativizing, like appeals to “military logics”, such as strategy and tactics,



logistical necessities, and “the fog of war”. When in the electric state of seduction, it becomes difficult to arm oneself against such arguments, as I discovered-often with a shock and sometimes long after the conversation-when confronted with differing interpretations and findings.

In sum, tropes of barbarism did not only impact on my field research directly, by producing a seductive sensationalism, they also had a more indirect imprint in that they shaped the counter-reactions to the initial effects that they provoked. The emotions unleashed by a partial overcoming of exoticism appeared to have rendered me less resistant to the lures of ethnographic seduction, thus further complicating the arduous quest for fragile “truths”. What also hampered this quest, as will be explained in the following, was the impact of the simplifying categorizations and conceptualizations of dominant discourses on my grids of intelligibility, in particular those of the domain of human rights.

#### *The imprint of dominant discourses on grids of intelligibility*

Any researcher working in a critical-realist paradigm (e.g. Sayer 2000) struggles with the problem of developing a sense of the “truth”. This problem presents itself in a particularly acute manner when the referents of knowledge are essentially contested, as is often the case in contexts of war. In this respect, Caroline Nordstrom (1997) speaks of the “factx”, highlighting the “x-factor”, or the uncertainty and indefinability surrounding the information that the researcher obtains in war zones. The Kivus are no exception to this, characterized as they are by a burgeoning “economy of truth-making” (Jackson, 2003: 195), the engine of which is *radio trottoir* (pavement radio) or the rumors machine. As elsewhere, Kivutians manufacture meaning in order to make sense of, but also manipulate, events. In such a context, representations can become the paramount field of battle, turning rumors into a powerful weapon of war.

One of the focal points of such battles for the factx is the identity of perpetrators of recurrent acts of banditry and other abuses. Many zones in the Kivus are plagued by frequent ambushes, violent robbery, assassinations, and theft. In several of these sites, the largest share of such violent acts are ascribed, at least in the official statistics, to so called “HUNI” or *hommes en uniforme non-autrement identifiés* (unidentified uniformed men). This creates space for “blame games”, with different groups accusing different kinds of alleged perpetrators, like Mai Mai militias, anonymous bandits, demobilized, “local youth”, or the FARDC (sometimes described as “dressed up as rebels” or presented as “deserters”).

When encountering such divergent accounts, I experienced at first a strong tendency to almost outright reject the military’s version of the factx. In the light of the power asymmetries between armed and non-armed actors, and under the influence of dominant Manichean interpretations of the military/civilian divide, I had the impulse to assess civilians’ observations as somehow always more reliable (cf. Robben, 1995). While it turned out that there are indeed good reasons to have a healthy dose of scepticism towards the FARDC’s descriptions and interpretations of events, I found that civilians’ accounts were not necessarily more reliable. In this respect, it is important to point out that the boundaries between the discursively constructed categories of “military” and “civilians” are shifting and may dissolve in certain contexts (Nordstrom 1997). This can be explained by various factors, including the multiplicity of actors’ forms of identification, the close interweaving of civilian and military lives in shared social webs and the specific modes of “social navigation” (Vigh 2009) that people in war zones commonly engage in, which prompts them to connect to multiple military and non-military networks, in which they come to enact a variety of social roles (Utas 2005).

For example, in a certain area where parts of the population are closely linked to a Mai Mai group, it was observed how civilian collaborators and sympathizers of the militia copied the

latter's exaggerated allegations of FARDC abuses (Verweijen forthcoming). These exaggerations appeared part of a political strategy to discredit the government as well as the particular army unit deployed there, which contained many soldiers of a certain ethnic background portrayed as hostile. By showing the blurriness between civilian and military actors, especially where ethnicity takes precedence over other forms of identification, these observations opened my eyes to the necessity to constantly reflect upon the positionality of "those researched upon", whether military or civilians. However, such reflection was at times compounded by the strong imprint of human rights discourses on my grids of intelligibility.

Human rights reports are a specific genre that blends a "politics of affect" (Härtig 2008) with a "politics of truth", by employing the universalizing language of expert knowledge, interspersed with testimonies of victims. At its core, the discourse of human rights is a professional discourse, characterized by the labelling and categorization of its objects of knowledge, thereby homogenizing and objectifying them (cf. Escobar 1994; Duffield 2007). The taxonomies of human rights as employed in the DRC are based on categories of either "victims" or "vulnerable", such as "internally displaced" or "women and children", or of acts of violence, like "arbitrary and unlawful detention". These etic labels, while perhaps useful as tools in judicial processes or advocacy, do not in any way capture the multiplicity, ambiguities and fluidity of the identities, meanings, narratives and ideas that float around in a real-life context.

A good example are military practices of arrest and detention. When describing how the FARDC would arrest and detain civilians, I initially often jotted down "arbitrary arrests" in my field notes. Informed by human rights discourses, I presumed that civilians would automatically perceive these acts as "arbitrary", hence unjustified. However, I gradually came to learn that (illegal) arrests of civilians by the military were not in all cases seen as "arbitrary". When inquiring about their thoughts on this practice, some of my interlocutors

told that the reasons for these arrests were a secret of the military, which they could not really know, or that they had no knowledge of the law or of military matters, and could therefore not tell. In another context, it was found that a certain arrest made by the military was denounced as unjustified by some, but seen as legitimate by others. The dividing line was whether one supported the Mai Mai or not, for the detainee in question was a school principal known as the ideologue of the political branch of this armed group. In sum, I found that arrests that are “arbitrary” from a strictly legal point of view are not always “read” as such by local audiences, and that this may have important consequences for evaluations of the FARDC’s practices more generally.

Another complexity arising from viewing events through the prism of human rights discourses was related to the latter’s blindness to civilian complicity in the production of military violence. As demonstrated by Stathis Kalyvas (2006), civilians often use political actors, including armed forces, to settle their own private conflicts, giving the production of a part of the violence during civil wars a joint civilian-military character. Indeed, I observed that people involved in disputes, whether around land, inheritance, mining concessions, debts, dowry, economic competition, love affairs or personal rivalries, would sometimes harness the military to “solve” their problems. They would for instance denounce their competitors to the FARDC as collaborators of a certain armed group or solicit a violent intervention from the side of the military more directly, like by asking them to intimidate their opponent or appropriate wealth by force, often against payment (Verweijen forthcoming). These findings were initially difficult to digest, since they destroyed the dominant narrative of civilian victimization, which is premised on the barbarism of the armed actor. The peristaltic movements of this digestion process made me once more sharply aware of the pressing weight of barbarism tropes on my research. However, this awareness also cleared the way for the development of coping strategies.

## **Taming or feeding the beast?**

Undoubtedly, my initial susceptibility to the conceptualizations of human rights discourses had been strongly reinforced by that fact that most of my ad-hoc collaborators were from a Congolese human rights organization. Possibly, my inability to “read” events in what was at first a largely unknown environment had prompted me to rely heavily on their framings. This had been reinforced by the intensity of interaction, since I was also hanging out with my collaborators when not visiting villages or military camps. It was only after developing wider and more diverse networks of contacts that I realized how much this social pattern had shrunk my interpretative horizons.

Many of the Congolese Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) that are headquartered in urban centers consist of relatively well-to-do and highly educated individuals, who share a certain mind-set and worldview. As elsewhere, these NGOs strongly frame their identity and activities in the idioms of the international aid industry on which they depend for material and symbolic resources (Chabal & Daloz 1999). Consequently, Congolese NGOs often operate with the same taxonomies, labels, narratives and representations as those of “outside interveners” (cf. Spivak 2004). While these are locally appropriated and infused with different rationalities, representations and narratives, their forms often remain the same, creating an impression of familiarity among foreign researchers. Perhaps this is the irony of globalization, the fact that one gets served pieces of new reality on familiar plates, as the “restaurant” where one goes to eat is a mere franchise of the one at home. This begs the question of the extent to which we, as researchers, can escape from this discursive recycling.

### *Reducing “interpretative dependency”*

An important pillar of my coping strategy was to learn Swahili. As Spivak (2004) reminds us, learning local languages is one of the few ways of setting oneself apart from self-styled

“international civil society”. While I certainly was still perceived as an outsider, being able to communicate in Swahili did change the way in which people reacted to me, and allowed me to understand more of their worlds. A second strategy was to remain independent and to avoid becoming embedded in a single social network, by means of diversifying social contacts and flexibly enlisting various research assistants in different zones. This, I hoped, would prevent my perceptions from being shaped by a single interpretative grid. Maintaining this diversity was facilitated by the “roving” character of my research: as I intended to gather data in many different research sites and villages, I frequently travelled. Due to limited resources, the bad road conditions in large parts of the Kivus, and ultimately also preference, I moved around mostly by mini-bus, motor-cycle and on foot. Sharing the hardships of travel, like being stuck in the mud, seeking shelter for a downpour or having to wait for hours after the umpteenth breakdown of the engine, turned out to be an effective way of reducing distance to my interlocutors. Furthermore, the roving nature of my research made it necessary to sleep over in villages, military headquarters and private homes of anyone ranging from motor-cycle taxi-drivers to customary chiefs. This too helped me to understand more of people’s everyday lives, and their frames of reference and narratives. It also prompted me to constantly reflect upon my positionality as a (privileged) researcher. This reflection was an integral part of another component of my coping strategies, related to the identification and analysis of power effects.

#### *Taking stock of power effects*

In her famous piece “Can the subaltern speak?” Gayatri Spivak (1988) calls for heightened self-reflexivity among those writing on the “developing world”. The production of knowledge cannot be separated from the production of power-and the investigating subject is inescapably influenced by the discourses and interests of the various socio-economic, geographical, and institutional spheres he or she is embedded in. This calls for a scrupulous

analysis of one's positionality and how it shapes knowledge production, including by means of identifying and tracing the genealogy of one's interpretative frameworks. Furthermore, it calls for a reflection on the power effects of both the "information retrieval" in the field and the knowledge one produces, by studying the interests that it serves or harms. So what power effects does my research have and what discourses do I reproduce in my inevitable complicity with the interpretative frameworks and institutional interests that define me? Am I "speaking for" someone, am I capable of "letting speak", and what are my capacities for listening?

The enterprise of researching those framed as "barbarians" is fraught with difficulties, for they do not make good subalterns. Even if we can let the armed actor speak, the chances he will be listened to are bleak, for by being *a priori* defined as a perpetrator, he is denied a voice. Depicting the armed actor as marginalized is equally problematic, for it is bound to give way to accusations of complicity and apologetics (Eriksson Baaz & Stern 2013). The task of listening seems even more complex when dealing with state armed actors. While in the rebel one can always still recognize a "freedom fighter", the government soldier operating in an authoritarian regime is inevitably cast in the unsympathetic role of tool of oppression, which further reduces the chances that we can hear him speak.

This evokes the question whether not any effort to make the barbarian heard is doomed to end in an orgy of Othering. It is not unthinkable that my research will produce such effects, since it describes a military that does not work according to "Western" templates and that has its own logics. Although I have strived to make these logics visible on their own terms, they still remain somehow "different". Therefore, will my writings not simply confirm readings of deviance and failure? And will my portrayal of Congolese civilians as having agency vis-à-vis the military, and as occasionally instrumentalizing military power for their own purposes, not confirm stereotypes of the Congolese as opportunistic and unscrupulous? Even if I committed

myself to the necessary but impossible task of trying to keep the barbarian out of my dissertation, will the reception of my work not simply re-erect him in all his glory?

Perhaps this inventory is too dark. For one, it could be argued, it ignores the new possibilities for the production and diffusion of knowledge created by the new media. As argued by Bhatia (2005: 11): “Indeed, those labelled barbarians, savages, bandits, criminals, subversives and terrorists are increasingly able to 'speak' on the world stage, and many are listening”. Are they?

*Will the new media kill the barbarian?*

While Bhatia acknowledges that the barbarians’ words are not likely to reach the new media un-mutilated, he nevertheless concurs that they can be made available by “an active search by the curious” (2005:11). But how will “the curious” read and interpret these words in the absence of contextual knowledge of “elsewhere”? Does the cacophony of information and images swirling around in the present-day (new) media space make it not more likely that the consumer of this knowledge will digest it according to sedimented representations and narratives? To me, it appears that the accelerating pace of the production, diffusion, consumption and digestion of information is closing in on opportunities for the time-consuming processes of reflexivity and unlearning. If anything, information in the (new)media space is becoming more superficial, more ad-hoc, shorter, and hinges heavier on sound-bites and images. How much scope is there for doubt, for questioning, for relativizing, for nuance in the space of even an extended tweet of 410 characters? Does the constant exposure to the iconic images of the Congolese child soldier or rape victim, unencumbered by much text or explanation, not drive barbarian narratives ever deeper into our minds?

It is certainly true that the new media revolution has made more information on African war zones available. There is a growing output of texts and images produced by the stream of



journalists, aid workers, students, diplomats and tourists that frequent these “forsaken places”. The ethnographer blogging from the field is no longer an exception. Additionally, the African Other too (at least the privileged Other) is now on Facebook, Twitter and blogs. Certainly, one could argue that this helps break the hegemony of the media-aid complex’s production of knowledge and makes both other voices from “the West” and new voices from “the South” more readily available. However, it is an open question in how far this will translate into knowledge that is less informed by deeply rooted colonial discourses. For one, the new media have created an ever larger stage for the display of the self-congratulatory portrayals of the brave Westerner weathering a storm of hazards and deprivation in the “land of the barbarians”. The urge of “having been there” gets all the bigger if the evidence can be immediately spread, and the “likes” instantly harvested. Hence, the mere increase in the quantity and variety of sources of knowledge does not automatically lead to a larger diversity in discourses. Moreover, as highlighted above, how information is read depends to a large extent on the perceptive grids of its consumers, making that narratives that deviate from the standard are not necessarily read and comprehended as such.

Another risk is that this new stream of information from or about “the South” is uncritically taken as new “truths”, given its veneer of “authenticity” by being based on first-hand accounts and self-produced images. As demonstrated by post-colonial theorists, colonialism was a global process which informed the identities and images of colonizers and colonized alike (e.g. Mudimbe 1988). In such a context, Spivak (1988) tells us, “authenticity” is a chimera; nobody is located outside of power and dominant discourse. This applies all the more to those whose professional discourses are strongly inscribed in the ones that predominate in “the West”, like the Congolese human rights defenders mentioned above. Furthermore, a belief in the “representativeness” or “authenticity” of the knowledge in the new media space ignores the largely invisible processes of selection that determine who has access to it. As I observed

during my field research, vast areas and broad layers of the population of the Kivus do not have access to the internet. This observation made me realize that any analysis of the impact of the new media on the production of knowledge on “the Global South” must reflect upon the question: “Can the subaltern tweet?”

New media create new dominant representations and new forms of exclusion, although at a global level, they seem to largely reproduce the existing power complexes and forms of knowledge that surround the “underdeveloped world” (Carmody 2009; Thompson 2004). My own research experiences confirm this: a product of the era of the new media, I did not have the idea that the images I had seen or the blogs I had read before entering the field, none of which featured unmediated accounts of soldiers, had better prepared me for “the careful project of unlearning our privilege as our loss” (Spivak 1990: 9). By contrast, whether produced by Congolese, other African or Western sources, they all presented the same simple and one-sided storylines in which the ambiguities and complexities surrounding civilian-military interaction had all but disappeared.

## **Conclusion**

In the course of my field research on everyday interaction between the Congolese army and civilians in the Kivu provinces, I experienced how deep my perceptions and grids of intelligibility were influenced by tropes of barbarism and dominant discourses on development and human rights. This provoked a distracting sense of sensationalism, enhanced my susceptibility to ethnographic seduction, and reduced my capability to establish the facts and grasp emic understandings. It was particularly puzzling to find that the civilian/military divide does not seamlessly fit rigid moral schemes of good and evil. This made me realize how much the figure of the barbarian allows us to cling to our comfortable position on the

moral high ground, preventing us from making a free fall into the initially unsettling world of ambiguity, where moralities, narratives and identities are multiple, ill-delineated and ever-shifting.

I also found that the new media revolution, which is an important dimension of processes of globalization, had not helped me in any sense with the identification and modification of my interpretative grids. Although the new media have perhaps broken the near-monopoly of the media-aid complex in the production of narratives and images of African war zones, their potential to make us capable of listening seems limited. Thus, there appear to be no shortcuts to the efforts of unlearning: only long-term fieldwork and the time-consuming process of learning local languages seem to bear the potential for a more ethical encounter with “the Other”, although they are by no means a guarantee.

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